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ABSTRACT

The open admissions policy at the City University of New York (CUNY) and the effect of fiscal crisis in New York are considered. One of the important changes that occurred after the fiscal crisis in 1975 was that entry to CUNY's senior colleges became more difficult. Another change was the implementation in 1977 of a more stringent and precisely defined retention policy. Students were required to earn credits at a specific rate and with a gradually increasing grade point average. In 1976, a new, more far-reaching policy of skills assessment testing was initiated. It was mandated that incoming freshmen take skills assessment tests in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics, and university-wide minimum competency standards were set. In addition, CUNY's free tuition policy was affected by the fiscal crisis, and beginning in fall 1976, tuition was changed for the first time. Modifications in fiscal and academic policies have resulted in the following: student enrollments declined from 250,000 to 200,000 between 1975 and 1976; the proportion of minorities has increased sharply, while the proportion of white ethnics has fallen substantially (minorities were more likely to qualify for full state financial aid); the percentages of freshmen taking remedial courses has increased; and the dropout rates have greatly increased. (SW)

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MASS HIGHER EDUCATION IN AN ERA OF SCARCITY: OPEN ADMISSIONS AND CHANGING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES AT THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

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Introduction

The initiation of the open-admissions policy at City University of New York (CUNY) and subsequent modifications of the program may be understood in the context of broad national trends. The 1960's and 1970's were a period of great concern about opportunity in American society. The era, especially during the 60's was one of material abundance, and that abundance supported a faith that the progress of disadvantaged groups need not be achieved at a cost for already advantaged ones. As a consequence of this faith and the strong impetus provided by the civil rights movement, urban unrest, and "great society" programs, minorities increased their participation in many arenas of the national life. Higher education was one of the major arenas of expanded opportunity.

One of the most important examples was initiated in 1970 when the seventeen senior- and community colleges comprising the CUNY system launched the open-admissions policy. Though open-access policies were hardly new in American higher education, in several important ways CUNY's program went further than others in extending the concept of educational opportunity. The policy not only guaranteed a place somewhere in the University to any graduate of New York City's high schools, it also relaxed criteria for admission to the four-year or senior colleges, to allow more minority students into those institutions. Concretely, the University developed a dual admissions scheme whereby students who

earned an 80 average in high school college preparatory courses, or who ranked in the top fifty percent of their graduating class were typically guaranteed admission to one of the CUNY senior colleges. This percentile rank criterion was designed to provide access to students from ghetto high schools where academic averages were generally low. As a result, CUNY's four-year schools became more accessible than in other open-access systems such as California's, where students with low high school averages were far liklier to be placed in two-year colleges (a detailed description of the admissions policy and the events leading up to it is provided in Lavin, Alba, and Silberstein, 1981).

Open admissions was distinctive not only for the policy of access. The intent of the policy was to affect the entire course of students' careers, not just the point of entry. Thus, to reduce further any internal stratification of students, the policy stipulated that senior colleges must admit all community college graduates with full credit. In designing CUNY's open-admissions policy, the University's Trustees also determined that the open door should not become a revolving one. Throughout the system remedial programs and other supportive services were mounted on a massive scale. All students were allotted a "grace period" of one year during which they could not be suspended for academic reasons. Overarching the open-admissions policy was the University's century old tradition of free tuition which had always stood as a symbol of its mission to serve the poor of New York City.

The Fiscal Crisis of New York

Six years after it began CUNY's ambitious policy was undercut. In the spring of 1975, New York City was struck by a fiscal crisis of major proportions. The specter of municipal default loomed large. As the city strove to contain the crisis, all municipal services experienced subststantial cutbacks, but by far the heaviest buffeting was received by City University. It was asked to absorb the largest percentage reduction of any municipal service area and to counteract part of the shortfall through the imposition of tuition charges at the levels then in force at the State University of New York (SUNY). In the wake of the crisis, older debates that accompanied the birth of open admissions were resurrected with renewed intensity. These debates had been expressed in the form of a widely perceived tension between broader opportunity for college on the one hand, and the preservation of academic standards on the other. This tension between "equity and excellence" never disappeared after open admissions began--it simply faded a bit into the background. But under the pressures of fiscal austerity, the controversy intensified and was used to justify important modifications in the University's academic and fiscal policies. Among the important changes that occurred in the aftermath of the fiscal crisis were these:

(1) Admissions policy. Though guaranteed admission to the University for all high school graduates was maintained, entry to CUNY's senior colleges became more difficult. Before the

fiscal crisis eligibility for a senior institution required a high school average of 80 or rank in the top fifty percent of the high school graduating class. Beginning in 1976 an average of 80 or rank in the top thirty-five percent was required.

(2) Retention policy. In its effort to encourage students who entered CUNY with weak high school preparation, the University had been applying relatively flexible standards of academic progress. Students were not to be dismissed for academic reasons during their initial year, and each CUNY college implemented retention criteria as it saw fit. Based upon the grades students earned over this period, their relatively high dropout rates and low graduation rates, it does not appear that academic standards at the University had declined (Alba and Lavin, 1982). Nonetheless, CUNY was subjected to occasionally scathing media attacks upon its standards, and an important segment of its Trustees believed that standards had declined. Partly as a result, a more stringent and precisely defined retention policy was adopted in fall 1976. Students were required to earn credits at a specific rate and with a gradually increasing grade point average. Moreover, it became more difficult to withdraw without penalty from courses in which they were doing unsatisfactory work. Students not meeting the new standards were to be placed on probation for one semester and dismissed if they did not meet them at the end of that term.

(3) Skills assessment program. Primarily to gauge the need for remedial programs, the University administered basic skills

tests to most entering freshmen in 1970 and 1971. In 1976 a new, more far-reaching policy of skills assessment testing was decided upon. It was mandated that incoming freshmen take skills assessment tests in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. University-wide minimum competency standards were set, and students who did not meet them were supposed to take remedial courses in their areas of weakness. Furthermore, students were not to be allowed entry to the junior year of college unless they had passed all three tests. Graduates of community colleges could not matriculate at a senior college unless they passed all the tests.

(4) Tuition policy. CUNY's free tuition policy was the first casualty of the fiscal crisis. Beginning in fall 1976 tuition was charged for the first time. A partial offset to the new charges was the fact that New York State provided substantial financial aid through its Tuition Assistance Program (TAP). Under this program tuition was fully covered for full-time students from low-income families (roughly, family incomes below $10,000). Part-time students were especially affected by the policy. Before 1976 they paid no tuition if they were matriculated, but after tuition was imposed, they were ineligible for state support. Another characteristic of TAP was that it limited eligibility to a period of eight semesters. Substantial numbers of CUNY students require more time than this to complete their baccalaureate work. As these students approach the end of their undergraduate careers, they face loss of aid eligibility. While TAP is not the only available source of aid, it is by far

the most frequently used source for CUNY students.

Impact of CUNY's Policy Changes: Data

In order to guage some of the impacts of policy changes at CUNY, the essential strategy is to compare certain student characteristics and academic outcomes of the pre-crisis period (up to 1975) with those occurring after the crisis. For the pre-crisis period extensive data are available from a longitudinal study of the first three freshmen classes to enter CUNY after open admissions began--that is, the 1970, 1971, and 1972 cohorts. These data sets are described in detail in Lavin, Alba, and Silberstein (1981, Ch. 3), and include (1) CUNY census data, (2) high school background information, (3) tests of academic skills, (4) application and admissions data, (5) records of academic performance and persistence in CUNY, and (6) student surveys containing information on social origins, demographic variables (age, gender, etc.), aspirations and attitudes. The academic performance data cover the period, 1970-1975.

Recently a new longitudinal study in the post-fiscal crisis era has been initiated. This is a study of the freshman cohort that entered the University in 1980. The types of data used in the initial studies are again being collected. This allows us to compare selected outcomes of the earlier period with those of the current one. The comparisons involve contrasts between the 1970 and 1980 cohorts. The 1970 cohort population included approximately 35,000 cases. The 1980 cohort population includes about 31,000 cases. The student survey data include samples of 13,525 cases for the 1970 cohort and 11,625 cases for the 1980.

Results

The modifications in fiscal and academic policies appear to have brought about striking changes at the University. The most obvious has been one of size. Between 1975 and 1976 total student enrollments plummeted from 250,000 to 200,000. A good sense of the changes is given by Table 1 which shows first-time freshman enrollments over a period of more than a decade. Freshman classes which spurted from 20,000 in the year before open admissions (1969) to more than 40,000 in the mid-nineteen seventies, fell by as much as a quarter in the aftermath of the fiscal crisis. Such reductions exceed by far the shrinkage in New York City high school graduating classes which has been occurring since the mid-seventies.

The fall-off in entering classes has not occurred evenly among the ethnic constituencies which define the CUNY student clientele. Without question the greatest loss has been among white students. Table 1 shows that in 1975, the last year before the fiscal crisis, 22,768 whites enrolled as freshmen. In 1980 there were 14,401 white freshmen, a decline of 37 percent. Among Blacks the decline has been less dramatic, from 11,868 in 1975 to 10,801 in 1980--a reduction of only 9 percent. And among Hispanics the table shows there has actually been a slight increase in enrollments. It appears that whites, possessing greater economic resources, reacted in part to the imposition of

GROUP

TABLE 1 - ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATING CLASSES AND OF FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN AT CUNY: 1969-1980

	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1977	1978	1980
BLACK:										
% of High School Graduating Class	[a]	16	16	17	21	22	25	26	28	29
% of First-time Freshmen	14	17	21	22	27	29	29	33	32	34
Number of freshmen	2815	6144	8370	8340	10221	12087	11868	11161	10497	10801
HISPANIC:										
% of High School Graduating Class	[a]	10	9	12	14	15	15	17	18	18
% of First-time Freshmen	6	8	9	12	14	13	14	19	19	20
Number of freshmen	1215	2769	3332	4514	5358	5624	5732	6358	6202	6380
WHITES & OTHERS:[b]										
% of High School Graduating Class	[a]	74	75	71	65	63	60	57	55	53
% of First-time Freshmen	80	75	70	66	59	58	56	48	48	46
Number of freshmen	16223	26598	27509	25402	22419	24259	22768	16302	15601	14401
TOTAL FRESHMEN	20253	35511	39211	38256	37998	41970	40368	33821	32300	31582

Source: CUNY ethnic censuses

[a] not available for this year

[b] "others" are overwhelmingly whites. The remainder are Asians and American Indians.

tuition by going elsewhere to college. Minorities, on the other hand, by virtue of their much lower incomes than whites, were far more likely to qualify for full state financial aid, thus creating greater stability in their enrollment patterns.

How these shifts have affected the participation of various ethnic groups in CUNY's senior and community college tiers is suggested by a comparison of the ethnic profiles of the 1970 and 1980 cohorts. As Table 2 shows, about 6 percent of senior college freshmen were Hispanic in 1970, compared with almost 20 percent in 1980. Black freshmen increased from about 5 percent in 1970 to over 20 percent in 1980. Among the major white groups in the senior colleges, results are clearly in the opposite direction: Jewish students who accounted for over 40 percent of all senior college freshmen in 1970 were less than 15 percent of the 1980 cohort. White Catholics were a third of the 1970 freshmen, but comprised only a quarter of the 1980 group. For the community colleges, Table 2 reveals similar changes: the proportion of minorities has increased sharply, while the proportion of white ethnics has fallen substantially.

Though CUNY remains an open-access institution in the sense that any high school graduate is guaranteed a place, the distribution of entering students in the four- and two-year tiers of the University has changed dramatically, undoubtedly as a result of the modifications in admissions criteria for the senior colleges. In the first year of open admissions, 1970, 56 percent of entering freshmen were placed in a senior college.

TABLE 2

ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF CUNY FRESHMAN CLASSES: 1970 AND 1980

	Senior Colleges		Community Colleges	
Ethnic Group[a]	1970	1980	1970	1980
Black	5%	22%	14%	35%
Hispanic	6	19	10	28
Jewish	42	14	18	5
Catholic	33	26	44	21
Other White	10	10	10	6
Asian	3	9	2	4

Source: Sample data

[a]Columns do not always total 100 percent because some groups with small representation are omitted.

In 1980, under the changed admissions criteria, only a third of entering freshmen were placed in a four-year school. Thus, CUNY is now an institution much more centered around its community colleges.

As we have noted, as part of a tightening of academic standards, CUNY initiated a far-reaching policy of University-wide skills assessment testing in the late 1970s. The impact of this testing policy may be seen in the proportions of freshmen taking remedial work. Differences between 1970 and 1980 are portrayed in Table 3. In open admissions' first year 38 percent of senior-college freshmen took remedial work. In 1980 this was true for 64 percent. In the community colleges the figures were 44 percent in 1970, but almost double that figure, 85 percent in 1980. Not only have the percentages taking remediation in the freshmen year increased, but so has the number of courses taken. Analyses (not shown here) indicate that in 1970 less than 10 percent of senior college frosh took three or more such courses. In 1980 30 percent took at least three remedial courses. Similar results hold for community college students. Indeed, for the 1980 freshmen, more than half took three or more such courses, and more than a fifth took five or more. In short, in CUNY's community colleges many spent their freshman year primarily in remedial work.

These large increases in the remedial component appear not to be explained by a decline in the high school backgrounds of the incoming students. Indeed, quite the opposite appears the

TABLE 3

PERCENTAGE OF FRESHMEN TAKING REMEDIAL COURSES: 1970 COMPARED WITH 1980

	Senior Colleges		Community Colleges	
	1970	1980	1970	1980
Percent Taking Remedial Courses	38	64	44	85

Source: Population data

case: In 1970 sixty percent of senior-college entrants had high school averages of 80 or higher. This was true for more than 70 percent of entrants to these schools in 1980.

Though our analyses thus far do not enable us to pinpoint the effects of more stringent retention standards and the greater difficulties faced by many working students who must now balance the need for employment with the need for full-time matriculation status in order to be eligible for New York State's Tuition Assistance Program, there is no doubt that dropout rates at the University have increased substantially in the aftermath of the fiscal crisis. Table 4 indicates that about 19 percent of senior college freshmen in the 1970 cohort did not return for a second year of college. Among the 1980 cohort, the figure was almost 30 percent. In community colleges 30 percent of the 1970 cohort did not return for a second year, compared with over 40 percent of the 1980 cohort. As Tables 5 and 6 indicate, these increases have occurred for all ethnic groups, and within all categories of high school average.

Discussion

One must be cautious in interpreting events at CUNY simply as direct results of New York's fiscal crisis. Some changes, for example, the decline shown by Table 1 in the enrollment of whites, were in evidence before the crisis. Nonetheless, the great acceleration of that trend after the crisis leaves little doubt that it was a critical factor in the likely dispersal of whites to other sectors of the higher education system.

TABLE 4

PERCENT OF FRESHMEN NOT ENROLLED FOR A SECOND YEAR: 1970 COMPARED WITH 1980

	Senior Colleges		Community Colleges	
	1970	1980	1970	1980
Not Enrolled for second year	19	29	31	43

Source: Population data

TABLE 5

PERCENTAGE NOT REGISTERED FOR A SECOND YEAR BY ETHNICITY: 1970 COMPARED WITH 1980

	Senior Colleges		Community Colleges	
Ethnic Group	1970	1980	1970	1980
Black	18	26	24	38
Hispanic	17	29	28	41
Jewish	10	19	22	35
Catholic	19	23	29	41
Other White	15	24	25	38
Asian	7	24	10	27

Source: Sample data

TABLE 6

PERCENTAGE NOT REGISTERED FOR A SECOND YEAR BY HIGH SCHOOL AVERAGE: 1970 COMPARED WITH 1980

	Senior Colleges		Community Colleges	
High School Average[a]	1970	1980	1970	1980
50 - 69.9	39	40	34	44
70 - 74.9	28	37	30	40
75 - 79.9	22	29	26	34
80 - 84.9	16	28	29	32
85 or higher	11	22	21	24

Source: Population data

[a]Only courses deemed college preparatory (science, math, English, etc.) by the University are calculated in the average.

Similarly, changes in admissions policies have clearly shunted more students to the CUNY system's two-year college tracks. In the process minority students have been disproportionately moved to the community colleges, since their high school backgrounds are typically weaker than those of whites. That this is the case for minorities is shown in Table 7 which presents the ratios of the proportions of minority students in the University to their proportions in senior colleges. As can be seen, there was a sharp drop in their senior college representation after 1975, the last year before the fiscal crisis. Indeed, their representation in 1980 was lower than at any time since open admissions began.

Community colleges play a controversial role in American higher education. The famous article by Clark (1960) and the critique of Karabel (1972) noting their class reproduction functions suggest that placement in community colleges tends to reduce ultimate educational attainment. Indeed, a recent study by Alba and Lavin (1981) indicates that students placed in CUNY two-year schools acquire fewer years of education than comparable students initially placed in four-year schools. Thus, increased placement in community colleges is likely to depress overall educational attainment among CUNY students in the 1980s. Moreover, disparities between whites and minorities which had been narrowing in the mid-seventies (Lavin, Alba, and Silberstein, 1981, Ch. 10) are undoubtedly widening again as a consequence of the more stratified admissions criteria.

TABLE 7

REPRESENTATION OF MINORITY FRESHMEN IN SENIOR COLLEGES FOR SELECTED YEARS[a]

Cohort	% Minority in CUNY	% Minority in Senior Colleges	Index of Representation[b]
1969	10	4	.43
1970	18	11	.64
1975	37	33	.89
1980	46	27	.58

Source: CUNY censuses for the years shown.

[a]Figures represent only students admitted to CUNY through regular admissions procedures. Students admitted through special admissions programs are not included.

[b]The index of representation is obtained by dividing the percent minority in senior colleges by the percent minority in CUNY. As shown in the table, all percentages are rounded, but indices were calculated using unrounded percentages.

CUNY's tightened procedures for placement of students in remedial courses--designed to increase educational life chances--may, paradoxically, create additional burdens for students, especially in the initial year of college. For many the freshman year is taken up largely by remedial work offering little or no credit. The resulting slow progress toward a degree may become discouraging. This may be particularly the case with minority students, since they are far more likely than others to find themselves taking course loads heavily saturated with remedial work.

The tuition policy no doubt has different consequences for different groups. Low-income students who are not working may feel relatively little impact and can pursue their studies full-time. On the other hand, students who work full-time or for substantial hours per week may find themselves in a bind. Before tuition they were able to pursue their studies part-time, but now they must register as full-time students in order to protect their financial aid eligibility. As a result, their academic performance may suffer, thus affecting their persistence in college.

Though our analyses of the academic fate of the 1980 cohort are in an early stage, some of the initial results reported here suggest that policy changes have led to a decline in educational opportunity at CUNY. Moreover, though some of the themes may be local, we think that what has happened at CUNY, the nation's third largest university, has been premonitory

of broader national currents that may be widening the gap in educational attainment (and, ultimately, life chances) between the affluent and the needy and between whites and minorities. As our research proceeds, we expect that forthcoming analyses will put into sharper focus the various changes in academic careers that are occurring in the post-fiscal crisis era.

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